

## Copycat Suicides Without an Intention to Die After Watching TV Programs: Two Cases at Five Years of Age

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### ABSTRACT

Suicide is an intentional self-destructive act. As conceptualization of death as an irreversible end occurs at approximately 8–10 years, attempted and completed suicides are rare before 7 years of age. Studies have suggested that media may contribute to increased suicides in adolescents through social learning. Effects of media on suicides were thoroughly evaluated in children and adolescents who committed suicide after identifying with the subject of a TV program, movie, or book. We present 2 cases at 5 years of age who committed suicide by hanging themselves after watching a TV program. These cases differed from

copycat suicides reported in the literature that are performed mostly by adolescents because victims are very young children and because they died without an actual intent to die while they were imitating suicides. By presenting these cases, we want to emphasize that destructive effects of media may involve not only adults and adolescents but also very young children who do not have a completely developed concept of death.

**Keywords:** Copycat suicides, Werther effect, hanging

### INTRODUCTION

Low rate of attempted and completed suicides in children are thought to be due to immaturity of psychic structures to make a decision regarding suicide, dependent nature of childhood, and more sensitive and caring attitudes of families during childhood (1). Suicide attempts are very rare before 7 years of age (2).

Interest of children about death begins at very early ages (3). For 3–4-year-old children, death is a long separation or long trip that has a comeback (4). At age 5, death is generally perceived as a long period of sleep and it starts becoming scary (4). Generally, at ages 8–10, death is started to be accepted as an irrevocable end of life (5).

In a review investigating 64 studies on developmental processes of children to gain death concept and their completed suicides, children were found to comprehend realistic death concept only after 9 years of age (6). Certain factors such as serious psychiatric disorders like schizophrenia and depression in children and personality features like impulsiveness, aggressiveness, and low self-confidence may play a role in suicidal cases during this time period (6).

An interesting point in our cases was copycat suicidal acts of 2 children at 5 years of age independently and at different time periods without an intention to die. More importantly, families of both of them reported that suicides followed TV programs that contained suicidal scenes. These cases were first evaluated in emergency departments and exitus occurred after a short time. Although a detailed psychiatric evaluation was not performed, interviews with the victims' families did not reveal a significant familial conflict or a developmental problem in the children.

### CASES

#### Case 1

E.A., a 5-year-old male was brought to the emergency room by his family. During his initial physical examination, he was unconscious. There was a ligature sign at his neck (Figure 1). There were petechiae at his neck and face. Spontaneous respiration was absent. Light reflex could not be evoked. Deep tendon reflexes were hyperactive. He was taken to an intensive care unit. Minimal edema was detected via computed tomography (CT) of the head. X-ray and CT of the neck did not show a fracture. No response was obtained to supportive treatments and exitus was accepted after 20 h. An interview with his family revealed that he had watched a movie approximately 30 min before he was found in the house, and there was a scene of hanging in that movie. Then, he hanged himself to a cupboard door with a rope. When they found him, his face was purple and he did not have spontaneous breathing. He had a middle socio-economical class family. His mental and physical



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development was consistent with his age. No aggressiveness, harm to self or others, or suicidal thoughts was reported.

## Case 2

M.Ş., a 5-year-old male was left alone at home approximately at 19:00 o'clock on the day of the incident. He was watching a news program that included scenes of violence. When his mother came home after a short time, she found him hanging to a door with a tie. He was not breathing. She called the emergency service. When they brought him to the emergency department, he was intubated. He was not conscious. There was no response to painful stimuli. Pupils were miotic and eyes looked upwards. Light reflex could not be evoked. He was admitted to an intensive care unit with a diagnosis of "asphyxia due to hanging" and resuscitated. He did not respond to resuscitation and exitus was accepted at 04:15. An interview with his parents revealed that developmental milestones were achieved at normal age, and there was no previous psychiatric history. No harm to self or others or suicidal thoughts was reported.

Informed consents were taken from the parents of both cases to publish photographs of the cases.

## DISCUSSION

In 1774, "Sorrows of Young Werther" was published by Goethe in Germany, and after the publication, many young people dressed and attempted suicides with guns like Werther (7). After these suicides, the book was banned in many European countries (7). Reference to this increase in suicide rates after media coverage was termed as the "Werther effect" (7). Media is believed to increase suicides in children and adolescents through social learning (8). In particular, after coverage of celebrity suicides in written and visual media, copycat suicides were shown to be very common. A meta-analysis by Stack et al. (9) included 55 studies and found that suicide methods used by celebrities were used approximately 5 times more than other suicide methods. After a book was published on self-asphyxiation, there was 313% increase in suicides involving this method; this definitely showed the effect of media on copycat suicides (10). Previous studies reported that suicide-promoting effects increase when the suicide is more explicitly covered in visual media, the victim in the covered suicide is a celebrity, and/or the victim has similarities with the vulnerable child or adolescent (10,11,12). Although some of the cases in these studies were children, we could not find a report of a suicide in a child at or younger than 5 years of age. Motivation of the presented cases cannot be named as the Werther effect due to some reasons. First of all, an index case should be present to use the term (i.e., Werther effect), but in our cases, the children watched different TV programs. We do not know whether there were additional suicides after watching these programs during the same time period. Moreover, in the Werther effect, people with mental problems who are prone to suicide attempts commit suicide after an index case, but in our case, the victims did not have previous mental problems or suicidal thoughts.

An interesting feature of the presented cases is death of these children despite them having no intention to die. A 7-year-old child was reported

to try hanging himself after he watched a hanging scene in a movie (13). Also, after the hanging of Iraq's ousted President Saddam Hussein was broadcasted, many children at 8–13 years of age in different countries of the world, including Turkey, were reported to try to hang themselves (14). Information from families and friends of these children revealed that they tried to copy hanging scenes as if they were playing a game. Although this behavior is not intentional and it may best be named as accidental suicide, it is still important because widespread access to media may cause increasingly more childhood deaths.

Facilitative role of media in children and adolescents who have suicidal thoughts is known for a long time. However, the effects of media are not limited to this vulnerable group, and the role of media in copycat suicides of young children who lack the concept of death is a new topic. Growing knowledge on this topic may help in developing social awareness in order to regulate media coverage of suicides and homicides.

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